

# 12

## Language

What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By another name would smell as sweet.  
*William Shakespeare*

If thought  
corrupts  
language,  
language can  
also corrupt  
thought.  
*George Orwell*

WITH A KNOWLEDGE OF  
THE NAME COMES A  
DISTINCTER  
RECOGNITION AND  
KNOWLEDGE OF THE  
THING.  
*Henry David Thoreau*

Language is not only the vehicle  
of thought, it is a great and  
efficient instrument in thinking.  
*Humphrey Davy*

One of the most  
powerful aspects of  
language is the way  
it is used to make  
simple  
classifications:  
'animals'; 'courage';  
'blue'. One of the  
most dangerous  
aspects of language  
is the way it is used  
to make simplistic  
classifications:  
'Third World';  
'fascist'; 'terrorist';  
'communist'.  
*Anon*

The limits of my language stand for the limits  
of my world.  
*Ludwig Wittgenstein*

**Verbosity leads to unclear, inarticulate  
things.**  
*Dan Quayle*

I know more than I can say.  
*Michael Polanyi*

IF YOU CAN'T SAY IT, YOU DON'T  
KNOW IT.  
*Hans Reichenbach*

We are getting into semantics  
again. If we use words, there  
is a very grave danger they  
will be misinterpreted.  
*H. R. Haldeman*

How often misused words  
generate misleading thoughts.  
*Herbert Spencer*

## Aims

By the end of this chapter you should:

- appreciate that language is an incredibly rich and complex thing, and that it can be non-spoken
- appreciate the distinction between language as a neutral, transparent tool for communication and language as a value-laden system of persuasion and implication
- understand that language may not map perfectly to the 'real world' and that this can mask a poor understanding of the 'real world'
- understand the arguments for and against the position that language can affect thought
- be informed about some of the issues raised by the existence of several languages
- begin to appreciate the subtleties and difficulties associated with the concept of 'meaning'
- begin to appreciate possible links between language, experience and identity.

## Introduction

The whole concept of naming has long and mysterious overtones in mythology, religion, literature and superstition. 'In the beginning was the Word ...' will be a familiar phrase to many, but it is not only Christians for whom words have a mystic significance. Orthodox Jews do not name a child after any living relative. In some creation myths, the act of naming things brings them into existence and in some religions the name of God is secret and unutterable. In some cultures people are reluctant to tell strangers their names, for fear of giving the strangers power over them. (In some tribes people even had two names – their 'real' one and one for strangers.)

Nor are we immune from this way of treating words with a certain amount of respect. We are offended when people consistently forget our names, even if they remember our faces. We feel that referring to humans by numbers and not names is cold and unfeeling (though of course in some ways a number is a word just like a name). Some people have words they would rather not use for fear of bringing bad luck – this is why we use terms like 'pushing up the daisies' rather than 'dead'. Some even consider it 'tempting fate' to talk too much about a baby before it is born, fearing the words will bring on a difficult or dangerous birth.

Despite these examples, most of us no longer believe that language is important in this way, and can hardly see what all the fuss was ever about. Ever since the story of the Danish King Canute who tried to order the waves back, but who got his feet wet, we have realised that the world does not bend to our language. We have words to describe the world, and we all use them – as long as we all use the same words then everything will work out. Language is rather like money – it has no intrinsic value, but a socially constructed purpose. We need to



communicate, and depending on where and in what age we are born, we will learn whatever language we are taught, and use it more or less effectively to do what we need to do. Language may change over the centuries, and older folk may make a little fuss about each new generation taking liberties with grammar, but that applies to most fields of life! What could be more transparent and easy to understand than words and language?

In this chapter we shall see that language, while not having any magical effects, is in fact far from simple and straightforward. Spoken language presents enormous problems and areas of research not only to linguists, but also to philosophers, computational theorists, anthropologists, psychologists, evolutionary biologists and neurobiologists. To us, spoken language appears to be effortless, simple and easy – but if eagles could speak, they would probably describe their aerial manoeuvres in much the same way. The ease with which language comes to us makes it all the more miraculous. If I make up a sentence such as ‘Blue Arabian princesses always choose to eat roast pineapple rather than grilled jellyfish, except when dining with the emperor’s cousin’ then not only have I constructed something unique in the history of the Universe, but I have also managed to convey to you, in the space of a few seconds, a remarkably complex hypothetical situation. Even though I know only a few thousand words, I can convey an unlimited number of ideas about people, places and times; I can create whole worlds of the imagination. Once we begin to look closely at what words actually mean, rather than what dictionaries say they mean, we shall see that anyone who can use everyday language is performing incredible mental feats whenever they utter a single, simple, meaningful sentence.

Humans are unique in their ability to use language. Although other animals have signs and signals for certain biological needs and functions (and arguably even emotions), none lives in the same linguistic world that we do. Every group or tribe of humans ever discovered has had a language of its own; deaf and speechless humans develop sign languages every bit as subtle and nuanced as spoken languages. We shall see that our language capacity is many-faceted, and is intimately related to the human experience.

**A** Are there any phrases or sayings that you (or someone you know) avoid because they are unlucky in some way, or which ‘shouldn’t be said’ for some reason?

**B** Think of a situation where language has got in the way of straightforward communication, or where language has been abused to serve some end other than the neutral transfer of information.

## Language and values

The point about language and values is best made through some examples.

- What is the difference between a devout believer and a fanatic?

- What is the difference between a black person, a person of colour, a coloured, a non-white, and a nigger?
- When the African National Congress was fighting a guerrilla war in South Africa against the apartheid regime were they freedom fighters or terrorists? Justify your choice.
- Which of the above descriptions would you apply to the PLO or the IRA?
- Look up the words ‘black’ and ‘white’ in a detailed dictionary. Is it possible to draw a conclusion about racial characteristics or how they are perceived?

In each of these cases we might distinguish between what object/concept the word refers to and the ideas associated with it. Technically speaking, ‘black man’ and ‘nigger’ might refer to the same person, but one is clearly offensive and unacceptable (although it is interesting to note that some black people use the word ‘nigger’ themselves, and in this context it is not racist). The **denotation** of the word ‘nigger’ is a black person, but the word has racist **connotations**. Many words have connotations.

**A** What is the denotation of the word ‘stud’ (that is, what does the word stand for)? What is the connotation of the word?

**B** What is the denotation of the word ‘slut’? What is the connotation of the word?

**C** Here is an extract from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

*The famous siege of the Alamo in San Antonio lasted from February 23 to March 6, 1836. The strategic objective of the stand was to delay Mexican forces and thereby permit military organisation of the Texan settlers. As the battle climaxed with a massive attack over the walls, the defenders (about 187) were all killed. Among the dead were the famous frontiersmen Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett. On April 21 Sam Houston led a surprise attack on the Mexican troops at San Jacinto and he succeeded in capturing Santa Anna and in securing victory for the Texans.*

*The Texan revolution was not simply a fight between the Anglo-American settlers and Mexican troops; it was a*

*revolution of all the people who were living in Texas against what many of them regarded as tyrannical rule from a distant source. Many of the leaders in the revolution and many of the armed settlers who took part were Mexican.*

Which side do you think the writer of the piece supported? Why?

Rewrite the piece to give essentially the same information but with the opposite bias. You may find it helpful to refer to ‘Mad Dogs and Englishmen’ on page 266 and ‘Mokusatsu’ on page 267.

**D** Consider the following:

- I am firm; you are stubborn; he is a pig-headed fool.
- I am sparkling and witty; you are talking a lot; he is jabbering on.
- I daydream; you are an escapist; he is totally delusional.

‘Conjugate’ the following in the same way:

- I am ambitious ...
- I have a sense of humour ...
- I love my country ...

The rest of this section consists of extracts that deal with issues such as racism, terrorism, the Gulf War, the dropping of the atomic bomb in the Second World War, and a fairy tale. Apart from the fairy tale, you might think that the theme is something to do with war, or maybe morality. It is easy enough to link the articles to these themes. But the real point of looking at these extracts now is to consider how the language is used in each case, and how the ‘facts’ are conveyed in and by language. As you read, think carefully about the way the words are chosen and the way they are put together.



## Mad Dogs and Englishmen

These are all expressions used by the British press while covering the First Gulf War

### We have ...

army, navy and air force  
reporting guidelines  
press briefings

### We ...

suppress  
neutralise  
dig in

### We launch ...

first strikes  
pre-emptively

### Our soldiers are ...

boys  
lads  
cautious  
confident  
young knights of the skies  
loyal  
desert rats  
resolute  
brave

### Our missiles are ...

like Luke Skywalker zapping  
Darth Vader  
causing collateral damage

### George Bush is ...

at peace with himself  
resolute  
statesmanlike  
assured

### Our planes ...

suffer from a high rate of attrition  
fail to return from missions

### They have ...

a war machine  
censorship  
propaganda

### They ...

destroy  
kill  
cower

### They launch ...

sneak missile attacks  
without provocation

### Their soldiers are ...

troops  
hordes  
cowardly  
desperate  
bastards of Baghdad  
blindly obedient  
mad dogs  
ruthless  
fanatical

### Their missiles are ...

ageing duds (*rhymes with scuds*)  
killing innocent civilians

### Saddam Hussein is ...

demented  
defiant  
an evil tyrant  
a crackpot monster

### Their planes ...

are shot out of the sky  
are zapped

## Mokusatsu

Asked what he would undertake first,  
Were he called upon to rule a nation,  
Confucius replied: 'To correct language ...

If language is not correct

Then what is said is not what is meant;

Then what ought to be done remains undone;

If this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate;

If morals and art deteriorate, justice will go astray;

If justice goes astray

The people will stand about in helpless confusion.

Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said.

This matters above everything.'

Asked to surrender in World War II,  
The Japanese employed the word 'mokusatsu'  
In replying to the Potsdam ultimatum.

The word given out by the Dome news agency  
Was interpreted in Washington as 'treat with contempt'  
Rather than 'withholding comment' – pending a decision –  
Its correct meaning.

The Americans concluded that their ultimatum had been rejected;  
The boys in the back-room could now play with their new toy.  
A hundred and forty thousand people lay around in helpless confusion.

Today 'peace' is mistranslated and means a seething stalemate

Instead of calm;

'Strength' is mistranslated, and means paranoid force

Instead of right-minded confidence;

'Defence' is mistranslated and means the psychotic accumulation of weapons

Instead of the exercise of skill;

'Testing' is mistranslated and means the detonation of a nuclear device and  
the release of radioactive clouds

Instead of a tentative experiment;

A 'disarmament treaty' is mistranslated and means dismantling obsolete  
weapons in the face of economic constraints,

Ritually attended by a spurious euphoria;

'First strike' is mistranslated

And means last strike;

'Safety' is mistranslated,

and means danger.

by Heathcote Williams



# There was once

by Margaret Atwood

- There was once a poor girl, as beautiful as she was good, who lived with her wicked stepmother in a house in the forest.
- Forest? Forest is passé. I mean, I've had it with this all this wilderness stuff. It's not the right image of our society today. Let's have some urban for a change.
- There was once a poor girl, as beautiful as she was good, who lived with her wicked stepmother in a house in the suburbs.
- That's better. But I have to seriously question this word 'poor'.
- But she was poor!
- Poor is relative. She lived in a house didn't she?
- Yes.
- Then socio-economically speaking, she was not poor.
- But none of the money was hers. The whole point of the story is that the wicked stepmother makes her wear old clothes and sleep in the fireplace.
- Aha! They had a fireplace. With 'poor', let me tell you, there's no fireplace. Come down to the park, come to the subway stations after dark, come down to where they sleep in cardboard boxes, and I'll show you poor!
- There was once a middle-class girl, as beautiful as she was good -
- Stop right there. I think we can cut the 'beautiful' don't you? Women these days have to deal with too many intimidating physical role models as it is, what with all these bimbos in the adverts. Can't you make her, well, more average?
- There was once a girl who was a little overweight and whose front teeth stuck out. Who -
- I don't think it's nice to make fun of people's appearances. Plus you are encouraging anorexia.
- I wasn't making fun! I was just describing.
- Skip the description. Description oppresses. But you can say what colour she was.
- What colour?
- You know. Black. Brown. White. Red. Yellow. Those are the choices. And I'm telling you right now that I've had enough of white. Dominant culture this, dominant culture that...
- I don't know what colour.
- Well it would probably be your colour wouldn't it?
- But this isn't about me! It's about this girl -
- Everything is about you.
- Sounds to me like you don't want to hear this story at all.
- Oh well, go on. You could make her ethnic. That might help.
- There was once a girl of indeterminate descent, as average looking as she was good, who lived with her wicked -
- Another thing. Good and wicked. Don't you think we should transcend these puritanical, judgmental, moralistic epithets? I mean, so much of it is conditioning isn't it?
- There was once a girl, as average-looking as she was well-adjusted, who lived with her stepmother, who was not a very open and loving person, because she herself had been abused in childhood.
- Better. But I am so tired of negative female images. And stepmothers - they always get it in the neck! Change it to stepfather why don't you? That would make more sense anyway, considering the bad behaviour you are about to describe. And throw in some whips and chains. We all know what those twisted, repressed, middle-aged men are like -
- Hey just a minute! I'm a middle-aged -
- Stuff it Mr Nosy Parker. Nobody asked you. Go on.
- There was once a girl -
- How old was she?
- I don't know. She was young.
- This ends with a marriage, right?
- Well, not to blow the plot, but - yes.
- Then you can scratch the condescending paternalistic terminology. It's woman pal. Woman.
- There was once -
- What's this 'was once'? Enough of the dead past. Tell me about now.
- There -
- So?
- So what?
- So, why not here?

- A** What does this conversation tell us about the opening phrase, 'There was once a poor girl, as beautiful as she was good, who lived with her wicked stepmother in a house in the forest'?
- B** What sort of things does the second speaker object to?
- C** What is the principle behind the objections?
- D** Is the principle reasonable?
- E** What would happen if the second speaker applied her own principle to her own speech?
- F** What can we learn about language from this dialogue?
- G** Take a simple sentence and subject it to the same scrutiny as has been done here.

## Language and thought

*We dissect nature  
along lines laid down  
by our native  
language. Language  
is not simply a  
reporting device for  
experience but a  
defining framework  
for it.*

Benjamin Whorf

Developing an awareness that language contains values, and a sensitivity to the possibility of being influenced by these values, is important because it helps us to retain our independence and not be influenced by 'weasel words'. However, some have suggested that the influence of language runs far deeper than values, and that the languages we speak determine what we can think. This might sound silly at first, but **linguistic determinism** is the idea that our thoughts are completely limited by our language and is sometimes called the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, after the two anthropologists who suggested it. Particularly interesting evidence has been found from interviews with bilingual Japanese women living in America. These women were married to Americans and only spoke Japanese when they met each other - they used English the rest of the time. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the way these women thought should vary according to which language they were using, and an experiment was conducted to see whether or not this was the case.

The experiment involved a bilingual Japanese interviewer who visited each woman twice. In the first interview, he chatted with them only in Japanese. In the second interview, he asked them exactly the same questions, but only in English. The results are surprising; rather than giving the same answers but in different languages, as one might expect, the answers that were given seemed to depend on the language spoken. Here are two examples where the same woman seemed to change her views completely.

*'When my wishes conflict with my family's ...  
... it is a time of great unhappiness.'* (Japanese)

*... I do what I want.'* (English)

*'Real friends should ...  
... help each other.'* (Japanese)

*... be very frank.'* (English)

Proponents of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argue that the bilingual women 'lived in different language worlds' when they spoke English and Japanese, and this accounted for the difference in answers, attitudes and thoughts.



- A** How do you explain the results of this experiment?  
**B** To what extent is thought likely to depend on language?

We might also consider the role of language in our everyday lives and skills. Think of, for example, the surgeon specialising in the human hand who has a vast knowledge of every muscle, vein and joint. Much of this knowledge comes from extensive experience and training, but the training is not just a matter of chance. Training is important because in a few years it is possible to pass on what has taken hundreds of years to find out. The medical profession has developed a highly specialised and technical sub-language which has the sole purpose of communicating anatomical structure and form. The training of the surgeon must involve learning this dialect, because without it the anatomical facts could not be passed on to her with any degree of precision. By this argument, we need to develop certain aspects of language before certain skills.

- A** The argument above suggests that it is unimaginable for us to become experts in certain skills without learning the language developed for them. Is this correct? To what extent might this suggest that language determines thought?  
**B** Can you imagine developing the language of a skill without developing the skills itself? What might this suggest about the relationship between language and skills?  
**C** How do you think the surgeon learned the vocabulary she needed?  
**D** Explain, in words, how to tie your shoelaces. Do the words make it any easier? Do you use the words when you are tying your laces?  
**E** To what extent are your skills and thoughts dependent on language?

There seems to be some merit to the claim that aspects of language need to be developed before certain skills. If we have words for certain things then it makes effective communication and effective action much easier. Since these things (presumably) rely on thought, it seems that words make thought easier. In an extreme case, taking mathematics as a language (debatable, but let that pass for a moment), imagine trying to do maths of any complexity without employing the symbolic language of algebra. Trying to solve complex equations using words seems ridiculous, and certainly far harder than employing algebraic language. It is similarly difficult to imagine a lawyer who is not familiar with legal language, even ignoring the ridicule from fellow professionals (remember language also mediates social inclusion).

So if surgeons, mathematicians and lawyers can use their medical, mathematical and legal languages to think in highly sophisticated ways about their subjects, perhaps, by analogy, different natural languages lend themselves to thinking about nature in completely different ways. Tony Croft once quipped, 'Italian is designed for love; we speak with our friends in French; we use English to talk to our dogs.'

- A** The analogy between 'professional languages' and natural languages is used in the quote from Croft to suggest that different natural languages are better suited to certain tasks. Is this a good analogy?  
**B** If you are bilingual or trilingual, do you find it easier to think certain things in certain languages? Is it possible to think exactly the same things in different languages?

This idea has been famously extended by George Orwell in 1984, when he wrote about the government-invented language, Newspeak.

*The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to devotees of Ingsoc [the ruling political party], but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is a thought divergent from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. To give a simple example – the word 'free' still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in statements such as 'This dog is free from lice' or 'This field is free from weeds'. It could not be used in its old sense of 'politically free' or 'intellectually free', since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless. Quite apart from the suppression of definitely heretical words, reduction of vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself, and no word that could be dispensed with was allowed to survive. Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.*

- A** Orwell notes that 'a heretical thought ... should be literally unthinkable'. What does he mean?  
**B** Do you think that his analysis of the term 'free' is correct? Would people have the concept without the word?  
**C** Orwell is writing about a totalitarian society where language is under the direct control of the Government. Is the passage relevant to us in a more general sense?

Compared to the suggestion that language is needed for effective action, Orwell was defending a stronger form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Stronger still was its original formulation. In a now famous passage, Whorf wrote:

*We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions*



*which has to be organised by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organise it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organise it in this way ... [this agreement is] codified in the patterns of our language.*

You can see that Whorf suggested that language is the way humans solve what we have seen is a fundamental problem with our perception – our need to provide a structure to our sensory inputs. He suggests that people literally think in English, or Spanish, or Swahili. When you come across this idea for the first time, it may seem to be a bizarre and extreme position; that language shapes our entire worldview would suggest that native speakers of different languages see the world in a completely different way to each other. We should be clear that this has moved well beyond the vague ‘French is the language of love’ statement – it is a very precise articulation of the notion that our complete conceptual and intellectual apparatus is intimately linked to the spoken language. This may seem an absurd position, and one that can be instantly dismissed by common sense. After all, if I go on holiday to China and meet someone with whom spoken communication is impossible, we seem to share most concepts (as far as we can tell, which admittedly, may not be much) and deal with the world in the same way. However, common sense is not always a trustworthy guide to what is true and what is not, and some of the evidence we have seen so far might be difficult to explain otherwise (recall the data from bilingual Japanese women) so we should not dismiss Whorf out of hand. We should look at the evidence.

In one sense, we certainly dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages, at least in the way we speak. We do not have words for every concept or thing, and different languages sometimes have words with no direct translation into other languages. For example, the Portuguese word ‘geram’ means ‘unbearably cute’; the German word ‘schaudenfreude’ means ‘pleasure at the misfortune of others’; the French ‘chez’ means ‘at the home of the family of ...’; ‘mamihlapinatapai’ from Tierra del Fuego means ‘the state of mind in which two people regard each other, and both want something done, but neither of them wants to be the first to do it.’ These and other words of the same type have sometimes been taken to support a strong form of linguistic determinism. ‘Who but the Germans would have a word for such an idea – they think differently to us!’ is often the rather racist remark that goes along with such ideas. But a little reflection should show that, on the contrary, these words completely undermine strong linguistic determinism! When non-German speakers come across a translation of ‘schaudenfreude’ they aren’t unable to grasp its meaning. They think, ‘Aha! there is a word for that feeling that I know so well!’ The words are strong evidence that speakers of the two languages share a common mental world – which is, in this case, the world of universal human emotion. We might, of course, ask why it is that the Germans have a word for that particular emotion when

others do not, and this is certainly worth exploring, but it hardly seems to indicate that their thoughts are radically different to those of anyone else. Having said that, there are a few words here and there which do not seem to translate well. One such example is the German word *Verfremdung*, which apparently means ‘the act of making strange’ – which is intriguing and not immediately comprehensible. Does this indicate that there are some ideas that mean more in one language than another?

The idea that our mental world is far richer than our vocabulary is the basis of *The Deeper Meaning of Liff* by Douglas Adams, from which the following examples are taken.

**CORRIEARKLET** (n) *The moment at which two people approaching from opposite ends of a long passageway, recognise each other and immediately pretend they haven’t. This is to avoid the ghastly embarrassment of having to continue recognising each other the whole length of the corridor.*

**ELBONICS** (n) *The actions of two people manoeuvring for an armrest in a cinema.*

**ELECELLERATION** (n) *The mistaken notion that the more often, or the harder, you press an elevator button, the faster it will arrive.*

**OUGHTERBY** (n) *Someone you don’t want to invite to a party but whom you know you have to as a matter of duty.*

**SCONSER** (n) *A person who looks around when talking to you, to see if there’s anyone more interesting about.*

**SCAPTOFT** (n) *The absurd flap of hair a vain and balding man grows long above one ear to comb it to the other ear.*

**SHOEBURYNESS** (n) *The vague uncomfortable feeling you get when sitting on a seat which is still warm from somebody else’s bottom.*

Again, all these words are probably naming things with which you are already familiar, but which are unnamed. It can be interesting to discuss these ideas with speakers of other languages and to find concepts which have no direct translation.

**A** Identify some more mental concepts for which there should be words. Why is it difficult to do so? What implications does this have for the relationship between language and thought?

There is however, more evidence which Whorf used to support his theory of linguistic determinism:

- The perception of colour. Whorf noted that different languages have different numbers of colour words. Latin has no words for brown or grey; Shona speakers have separate words for greenish-yellow and yellowish-green and so on. Whorf takes this linguistic fact to be closely linked to perceptual ability; that is, he suggests that speakers of these languages really see the world differently from the way we do. Is this convincing?
- As an amateur linguist, Whorf’s translations indicated to him that speakers of Apache and English think entirely differently. Here are some examples (Apache translation in italics);



It is a dripping spring. → *As water or springs, whiteness moves downward.*

The boat is grounded on the beach. → *It is on the beach, pointwise as an event of canoe motion.*

He invites people to a feast. → *He, or somebody, goes for eaters of cooked food.*

He cleans a gun with a ramrod. → *He directs a hollow moving dry spot by movement of tool.*

With such different ways of describing the world, the speakers must think differently. Is this convincing?

Many have argued, however, that this evidence for linguistic determinism is not strong. Regarding colour, our visual apparatus is built around rods and cones which are sensitive to certain frequencies of light. Irrespective of the language we speak, all humans share basic physiology. Experiments have shown that speakers of colour-impooverished languages can distinguish between items which have colours outside their vocabulary. And how would babies learn to perceive colour if they needed language to do so? Animals don't need it, so why should we?

Some also remain unconvinced by the issue of translations. On the basis of different ways of speaking, Whorf argues that different ways of speaking suggest different ways of thinking. But surprisingly, he has no evidence of different ways of thinking other than their way of speaking (see the questions below for more analysis of this). It also turns out that Whorf made his claim about the ways Apaches think without meeting any, and was content to merely study their grammar. It is difficult to see how he could really have understood their thoughts!

Perhaps the most famous linguistic story of all relates to this area – it is about Inuit and the number of words they have for snow. Some accounts suggest that they have up to 400 words for different types of snow with meanings such as 'deep, soft snow, making walking difficult'; 'snowdrift formed on the side of a steep hill'; 'snowdrifts formed by a north-east wind'; 'snow with a thin hard crust that gives way underfoot'; 'snow roughened by rain or frost' and so on. Proponents of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis have taken this as the archetypal example of linguistic determinism, and suggested that Inuit live in a different conceptual world to speakers of other languages, and that if you and an Inuit were to look out over a snowy landscape, you would see entirely different scenes.

Unfortunately (as it seems such a gripping example), the notion that Inuit have hundreds of ideas for snow is a complete myth. Stephen Pinker, in his brilliant *The Language Instinct*, notes that the ideas could not have originated with anyone who has actually studied the Yupik and Inuit-Inuioaq languages spoken from Siberia to Greenland. Apparently, Whorf's teacher mentioned in 1911 that there were four unrelated root words for 'snow', Whorf exaggerated this to seven and implied that there were more. From there began the legend and its successively inflated exaggerations and misinterpretations. Some experts maintain that there are around a dozen words, but with 'snow',

'slush', 'avalanche', 'hardpack', 'powder', 'drift', 'blizzard' and 'dusting' (and I am sure there are others), English doesn't come too far behind. In *The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax*, the linguist Geoffrey Pullman makes a second point. Even if there were a large number of words for 'snow', so what? Printers have literally thousands of words for different fonts and are probably far more alert and aware of nuances in printed scripts, but that does not mean printers have a different perceptual status. Surely this is another example of the weaker form of linguistic determinism – that related to the language of the surgeon, mathematician and lawyer.

**A** When you are trying to solve a problem of some sort, to what extent is it useful to think in words? Do you ever find it helpful to read a problem out loud? What does this tell you?

**B** Consider Whorf's Apache evidence. Let us couch this argument in logical terms:

Premise: Apaches speak differently.

Conclusion: Apaches think differently.

You should be able to see that this is not a valid argument. In fact, there is a missing premise, one which Whorf assumed but did not make explicit. What additional premise is required to make the argument logically valid? Why does this premise, far from bolstering the argument, completely undermine it?

Just because Whorf's argument is invalid does not mean that his conclusion is wrong. So after all the different examples and ideas, and hopefully after some reflective introspection, the big question still remains. To what extent is thought dependent on language?

## Language as a means of miscommunication

There are many puzzles, riddles and jokes which are based around language. Here are some old favourites:

- What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object?
- Question: Which is better – eternal happiness or a bar of chocolate?  
Answer: Nothing is better than eternal happiness, but a bar of chocolate is better than nothing. Therefore a bar of chocolate is better than eternal happiness.
- First man: I didn't sleep with my wife before we were married. Did you?  
Second man: I don't know – what was her maiden name?

Before you go any further, try to answer the first question and resolve the ridiculous conclusion of the second example.

Some people, including philosophers, have said that philosophers are more concerned with playing clever games using complicated words than with actually getting to grips with reality. They felt this way because problems in language seemed

*Distrust of grammar  
is the first requisite for  
philosophising.*

Ludwig  
Wittgenstein



to be getting in the way of them making any progress with their inquiries. As a result, the twentieth century saw philosophers take a very close look at language, with the result that some very influential thinkers (most notably the **logical positivists**) suggested that much of what we say is completely and utterly without any meaning! While a detailed analysis of these ideas is beyond our scope here, in any search for reliable knowledge it is helpful to consider a few of the ways in which language can get in the way of understanding.

The most obvious difficulty is when a word has several meanings. This is such a persistent problem that logicians talk about the **fallacy of ambiguity**. In the world of physical objects, we are well aware that just because things look the same doesn't necessarily mean that they are the same (we learn this from bitter experience with tomato ketchup and chilli sauce). But this is not always so clear in the world of abstract concepts. A word may appear to be one thing, but turn out to be another.

**A** In the following sentences, analyse the different ways in which the bold words are used.

- Speeding is against the **law**.
- Things fall according to the **law** of gravity.
- It's an unwritten **law** that to get big business deals you need to bribe officials.
- If you persistently speed, the **law** of averages says that sooner or later you'll be caught.
- The **laws** of grammar dictate that you should not split infinitives.
- It is the **truth** that a triangle has three sides.
- 'There is ice at the North Pole' is the **truth**.
- There is real **truth** in that painting.
- 'Ain't that the **truth**!'

**B** Things get much worse when we begin to look at the meanings of sentences. Consider 'Time flies like an arrow.' This looks like a simple sentence – it means 'Time proceeds as quickly as an arrow proceeds' doesn't it? Here's another meaning: 'Measure the speed of flies in the same way as you measure the speed of an arrow.' Find three other meanings of the sentence, 'Time flies like an arrow.'

**C** Consider this sentence: 'We need some new alternative source of energy.' What would it mean if you said this? What would it mean if said by the chairman of an oil company?

**D** Think of some other phrases with multiple interpretations.

In addition to problems of ambiguity, we can sometimes be led into trouble by the *structure of sentences*. A common form of sentence in some languages is 'This chocolate is nice.' It is the form of the sentence we are interested in here. Similar sentences might be 'I am tired' or 'We are in love' or 'The rose is red.'

This type of sentence may seem innocent enough, but the concept behind the last example came under some scrutiny in previous chapters. When we say 'The rose is red' we mean that looking at this rose gives us the sensation of redness. The redness

was not in the rose because red is an experience. Admittedly, the rose has properties which seem to cause most humans to have this experience under certain lighting conditions, but that does not mean the rose possesses some quality of redness. The point is far more obvious with regard to 'The chocolate is nice.' Even though we understand the sentiment, in fact, the chocolate is not nice. Niceness is not a property that can exist outside the mind. When we say 'The chocolate is nice' we are using a shorthand for something like 'When I eat the chocolate, I have a sensation which I find pleasurable.' There is room for debate here, but we must be alert to the fact that language may suggest that properties of the mind are to be found in the material world.

**A** Each of the following sentences asserts that certain material objects possess certain qualities. In which cases are the qualities properties of the mind, and in which cases are they properties of the objects?

- |                              |                              |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| ■ The drink is sweet.        | ■ She is so sweet.           |
| ■ This knife is sharp.       | ■ He is as sharp as a knife. |
| ■ It is a hot day.           | ■ This curry is hot.         |
| ■ We are in love.            | ■ The drink is fizzy.        |
| ■ That is an excellent film. | ■ Here is a hard chair.      |
| ■ This is a hard exam.       | ■ He is intelligent.         |

**B** If you found any of the qualities to be in the mind, explain the meanings of the sentences.

The final problem we shall consider is that which arises when we rename a problem and think we have solved it. Imagine a little boy and his dad out for a walk. The boy sees some birds swooping around, falling, rising and squawking. The boy asks his dad why the birds are behaving in that way, and the father replies, 'Because they are starlings, and that is what starlings do.' Now children are wonderful in that they might not let Daddy get away with that – and nor should they. The problem of the birds' behaviour has been renamed as 'starling behaviour', but it is still a problem. As we all know, a repeated 'why?' may soon become difficult to answer, but it is better to admit ignorance than just to rename the problem.

The problem can be more or less serious, depending on the context. If I say that I find someone is attractive and you ask me why, I might say it is because they have big eyes. Well, the problem was to explain why a particular face is attractive, and now the problem has become to explain why big eyes are attractive. We may be happy to leave it there, and in this case we have clarified the statement somewhat, but we have made little progress towards understanding the nature of attractive features. We could ask ourselves why we find large eyes attractive, but the chain of 'whys' can go on and on, and quite when we should be satisfied is very difficult to determine. Suffice to say that if you give an answer which is no more general than the question, and is still quite mysterious, then you may have used language to rename the problem, but you have still made no progress towards a solution.



**A** Identify the problem with the following explanations:

- The bird found its way home by its homing instinct.
- He seems nervous; perhaps he has lost his confidence.
- Everyone listens to her – she has real presence.
- She seems so relaxed, as if she has found a new serenity.
- He fell to the ground, senseless. He must have lost consciousness.
- It fell because of gravity.
- He did well on the test because he has such a high IQ.

## Language and meaning

*It is very good for a man to talk about what he does not understand; as long as he understands that he does not understand it.*

G. K. Chesterton

We have seen that, in our search for reliable knowledge, we need to be wary of several pitfalls of language. We have, however, yet to deal with a very profound problem – that of meaning. What does ‘meaning’ mean?

The most obvious reply seems to be that language means something because it stands for something ‘real’ – words label things and thus represent the world. ‘John’ is a symbol which represents a particular person, and ‘brown house’ is a pair of symbols which represent a building of a particular colour. However, we quickly run into some obvious problems with this theory of meaning as representation. What does ‘different’ or ‘perhaps’ or ‘wonderful’ label? They clearly do not refer to any object at all, even an abstract one. Even simple phrases can turn out to represent far more than a state of affairs in the material world. The complexities of meaning are usually hidden from us because we are all so incredibly sophisticated at analysing everyday language. (Recall ‘Time flies like an arrow’ from page 276 and its multiple meanings.)

This is a far from obvious point, but it can best be seen when learning a foreign language. One of my German students said that ‘Hab dich lieb’ means ‘I love you’ in German. I don’t speak German, but I had thought that ‘I love you’ was translated as ‘Ich liebe dich’. When I asked the student if there was a difference, she said at first that they were the same. The conversation went as follows:

‘So are there any other ways you could say “I love you” in German?’

‘You could say “Ich mag dich”, but you wouldn’t say that to your best friend.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s not as strong as “I love you” in English. “Hab dich lieb” is friendlier.’

‘So “Ich mag dich” is an unfriendly way of saying “I love you”?’

‘No! It’s just that “Hab dich lieb” would be something between boyfriend and girlfriend, or maybe mother and child, or best friends. “Ich mag dich” is more like “I like you”. You would say it to somebody if you wanted to get together with them.’

‘So would a husband say “Hab dich lieb” to his wife?’

‘Not really.’ (screws face up) ‘It’s kind of a teenager thing. Or maybe between best friends, or a mother and child. You have to

really know each other to use it, but adults wouldn’t use it. “Hab dich lieb” is kind of a cute or a cool way of saying it. Adults would sound pretty funny saying it. A husband would say “Ich liebe dich” to his wife. That’s closest to “I love you” in English.’

‘What would you say to a really close friend?’

‘As a teenage girl, I would say “Hab dich lieb”.’

‘So boys couldn’t say that?’

‘Well that would indicate that they were gay.’

‘But it doesn’t mean that girls who say it are lesbian?’

‘No.’

‘So how would straight teenage boys indicate that they liked their best male friend very much?’

‘“Ich mag dich” I suppose ... But that sounds pretty weird.

Guys just wouldn’t say that, or maybe they’d just say something like “Du bist cool” – “You’re cool”.’

‘OK. And what about if you love running, or eating chocolate, or something?’

‘“Ich liebe rennen” is “I love running”. “Ich liebe ...” can be about things or people, but when it’s about people it must be about boyfriend/girlfriend.’

‘And what about “Hab dich lieb”?’

‘That can only be about people.’

‘How about “I love my pet dog”?’

‘No. That would be either “Ich lieb meinen Hund” or “Ich mag meinen Hund” – either would be OK.’

**A** The German student who told me all this thought that she knew what ‘Hab dich lieb’ meant, and indeed she did, though perhaps not consciously until we had discussed it. The sentence meant a lot more than it appeared to, and had more meanings than can be found in a dictionary. Find something that is similar in one of the languages you speak. You are looking for language which appears very simple but in fact has many shades of grey, many hidden rules, and which is doing far more than the simple, straightforward communication of one meaning.

The problems of translating between languages can be a source of great amusement. Apparently, when the Ford motor company introduced the Pinto car in Brazil, sales were almost non-existent, but when the company later learned that ‘Pinto’ is Brazilian slang for ‘tiny male genitals’ all became clear. Similar problems got an American chicken merchant into trouble when his advertising campaign featured a picture of him with a chicken. The macho slogan was supposed to say, ‘It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken,’ but when translated into Spanish it came out as, ‘It takes a sexually aroused man to be affectionate with a chicken.’ Other howlers include the following:

‘Bite the wax tadpole.’

(‘Coca-Cola’ as originally translated into Chinese.)

‘Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave.’

(‘Pepsi Comes Alive’ as originally translated into Chinese.)



*'You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid.'*  
(In a Japanese hotel.)

*'Drop your trousers here for best results.'*  
(In a Bangkok dry cleaner's.)

*'I am amazingly diverted by your entreaty for a room. I can offer you a commodious chamber with balcony imminent to the romantic gorge, and I hope that you want to drop in. A vivacious stream washes my doorsteps, so do not concern yourself that I am not too good in bath, I am superb in bed.'*

(From a response to an inquiry about accommodation.)

*'It is forbidden to enter a woman, even a foreigner, if dressed as a man.'*  
(Sign in a Bangkok temple.)

*'Would you like to ride on your own ass?'*  
(Advertisement for donkey rides in Thailand.)

These examples using foreign languages show that meaning is not at all straightforward, but the same is true of any language. The linguist Noam Chomsky uses the words 'brown house' to illustrate the point in English. We immediately know that a brown house is something with a brown exterior, not necessarily a brown interior. In this sense, we use the word 'house' in the sense of a surface, or a covering. A little thought shows that we use 'mountain', 'igloo', and many other words in much the same way. (To show this, consider the following observation: when you are in a cave inside a mountain you would probably say that you could no longer see the mountain, even though you could see the walls in the cave, so 'mountain' must be the exterior of the object.) The assumption works for incredible and imaginary objects as well – if I say that the castle floating in the air is golden then you immediately understand that it is the outside that is golden, not the inside. (Of course, I could explicitly mention that the inside is golden, too, but this would be an additional piece of information; if I only meant the outside then I would not need to explain that.) So the 'brown house' seems to go beyond a house which is brown; it means something about the geometric surfaces which are brown. This might be slightly surprising, but things go a lot further, because we do not always think of the brown house as the geometric surface. If I am inside a brown house then I would not say that I am near it. Nor, if I were in the middle of the house, would I say that I am further from the house than someone standing at the front door, which would be a logical thing to say if we really thought of the house as a surface. Now the brown house is not a surface, but more like a volume. So what does 'brown house' really mean? Does it have many meanings?

In some contexts the house is a surface, but in others it is not! So much for the meaning of 'house' referring to some physical object in a straightforward way. Like 'I love you' in German, even an apparently simple concept can turn out to be rather more complex when analysed carefully. Examples are legion. Consider 'Tokyo' – we might think that 'Tokyo' is simply the

buildings in a certain area, but that can't be the whole story. If it burnt to the ground, it could be rebuilt out of completely different materials, and it will still be Tokyo, even if the rebuilt one is completely different, and possibly even in a different place. (Contrast this with my 'car' – if it is burnt to the ground, then it cannot be rebuilt, even if we somehow use the ashes of the old car to do so it will still be a different car.)

To go any further would take us into semantics and other difficult linguistic areas. For our purposes, we simply note the enormous complexity of the meaning of even simple concepts such as 'brown houses', 'Tokyo' and 'car'. If we come to concepts such as love, energy, gross domestic product, disarmament and justice then we will be in even deeper water. The point is that there are not always objects in the world which correspond exactly to what we are talking about, and so we are left with a very profound problem to do with the meaning of words. When we combine words to create sentences, the problems rapidly multiply. An old joke illustrates the point: a child answers a phone, and the person calling says, 'Hello, is your mummy in?' The child answers 'Yes' and puts the phone down. We laugh (perhaps) because we understand what the child did not – that the meaning of a sentence goes far, far beyond the apparent meaning. Linguists refer to this as 'parole'. The child has understood only the direct meaning of the question, and not all the other social meanings that go with it. Think about a teacher saying 'Good Morning' to a class and you saying 'Good Morning' to your family. These two greetings may mean different things. But how can this be?

One final example of this nature: imagine you are changing a flat tyre on the side of the road on a cold winter's day. Someone approaches and says, 'Got a flat tyre?' What is the *psychological* meaning here? We might suggest something like:

*Hello. I can see that you have a flat tyre and that you are changing it. It is not good weather to be doing a job like that – I wouldn't want to be doing it by myself! And so perhaps, even though I do not know you, I can help. But I don't really know you well enough just to offer – and I do not wish to be embarrassed by a rejection. Are you approachable and friendly? This is my voice – you can see I am trustworthy. How about you? Will you give me a sign as to whether or not you wish for help?*

It is interesting to see that most meaning is about the social and emotional needs of the speaker or the listener. Very little of it is actually about 'fact' in the way we sometimes think. Quite how we manage to communicate such subtleties of meaning by so few words is still something of a mystery!

Despite these problems, most of the time we manage to communicate without actually saying what we mean. Some linguists have even gone so far as to refer to this as a scandal! Chomsky writes:

*About all we can say at a general level is that the words of our language provide complex perspectives that offer us highly special ways to think about things – to ask for them, tell people about them etc ... People use*



words to refer to things in complex ways, reflecting interests and circumstances, but the words do not refer; there is no word-thing relation.

In other words, to ask 'What does a word mean?' is like asking 'What does this chess piece mean?' The answer is that it only means something in the context of the rules that govern its use. Of course, this is unhelpful because we are then led to ask about the nature of these rules, and this is the subject matter of semantics. (This is an excellent example of a metaphysical problem being clarified enough to allow empirical enquiry – and what was once philosophy is now becoming science.)

- A** Find a word or simple phrase and apply the same kind of analysis as Chomsky has done to 'brown house'.
- B** Look at Chomsky's 'John, Bill, eat' example on page 289. Construct another series of sentences along the same lines which show the same problems of meaning.
- C** Find other examples of constructions that seem to follow different rules, though they look superficially identical.
- D** Explain in your own words what Chomsky claims that words 'mean' or 'do'.
- E** We have not yet touched on metaphorical or artistic meaning. Review the section in Chapter 3 (page 40) called 'The arts, experience, and the nature of artistic truth'. Find a copy of 'The Sunlight on the Garden' by Louis MacNeice (do an internet search) and decide what the poem means.

If we turn from specific to general ideas, we soon come across the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps the most original of the twentieth-century philosophers (although some of his writing reads more like a mystic's guide to life). In his first major work, the rather grandly named *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he addressed the relationship between language and the world. He suggested that language gives us a representation of the world, and the nature of this representation is fundamentally limiting. Just as we might use a physical model of cars to represent the situation during a road accident, so meaningful language stands for objects in the world, and nothing else. That is, he argues that words that do not directly correspond to objects do not have any meaning at all.

*The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e., propositions of natural science – i.e., something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.*

One of the features of this view (that any language which does not stand for anything in the world is literally meaningless and not worthy of attention) is that religion, aesthetics, ethics and indeed philosophy itself are consigned to the dustbin! This rather restricted view of language was very popular in the mid-twentieth century, perhaps because it allowed people to dismiss

many traditional ethical problems as meaningless and to think that they were 'solving' the problems by doing so. Since then it is fair to say that ideas have moved on and that hardly anyone today would argue that language alone can solve such a wide range of problems. Nevertheless, that was exactly what Wittgenstein thought. He even suggested that his own work, the *Tractatus*, was meaningless. He thought it should be used like a ladder to apprehend the truth about the language and the world, and then thrown away afterwards, and the whole of philosophy forgotten as a foolish and pointless pastime. This rather dramatic ending to the *Tractatus* may be summarised by its final classic sentence:

*Whereof we cannot speak, thereof must we remain silent.*

- A** Chomsky and the early Wittgenstein (he later took a different view) share a common suspicion about the meaning of words, but they look for solutions in completely different ways. Describe these ways, in your own words, and explain which one appeals to you more.

It's not that Wittgenstein didn't think that, for example, God exists, but that talking about God was literally meaningless. '*It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental.*' Later on, he was to change his views totally, and in his second major work, *Philosophical Investigations*, he suggested that far from being meaningless, the purpose of philosophy is to unravel errors in thinking which arise through linguistic errors, and thus get a clearer view of what he earlier thought were meaningless propositions. He suggested that language is not a picture of the world (perhaps now more in agreement with Chomsky), but more like a net that consists of many pieces of interconnected string. Our understanding becomes knotted when we misuse a word in a situation to which it does not apply.

*The fundamental fact here is that we lay down rules, a technique, for a game, and that when we follow the rules, things do not turn out as we had assumed. That we are therefore, as it were, entangled in our own rules. The entanglement in our rules is what we want to understand (i.e., get a clear view of).*

Thus philosophy appears to have little connection with reality and seems more concerned with language, in which we are entangled. A central point here is the suggestion that language does not provide a good description of the world. If we come across a paradox or a problem, sometimes we find that it is purely because we have set up a system with words that does not match the 'real world'. Often we don't realise that language is the problem because we naturally assume that it is a transparent and neutral thing.

Another point which emerges again and again is that of definition and meaning. If we try to pin down the precise meaning of art, or science, then we find that we can never quite do so – something always seems to elude our definition. In fact,



as we have seen, the same can be said of even the most mundane items – such as ‘house’. Wittgenstein gave a famous example:

*Consider for example the proceedings we call ‘games’. I mean board games, card games, ball games, Olympic games and so on. What is common to them all? Don’t say there must be something common, or they would not all be called ‘games’ – but look and see whether there is anything common at all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole lot of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look! Look, for example, at board games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card games; here you will find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out and others appear. When we pass to ball games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. Are they all ‘amusing’? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, the feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristics have disappeared. And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; we can see how similarities crop up and disappear.*

It certainly seems strange that the only things that all ‘games’ have in common is that we call them ‘games’, and that we cannot find necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be called a game. However you define ‘game’, something is either excluded when it should be included, or included when it should be excluded. Wittgenstein suggests this is true about words generally – they are far more complex than they appear to be.

Some have gone further than Wittgenstein and argued that defining what we mean precisely is totally impossible! Even ignoring the difficulties above, suppose, for example, I try to define ‘game’ as ‘a sort of contest’. You then ask what I mean by ‘contest’, and I say it is ‘an event where there is a winner’ (or some such thing). If you ask me what I mean by ‘winner’ then I may answer, but you can then ask me for a further definition, and ultimately will not really have got anywhere. At some point, we have to make do with undefined terms. In this example, if we do not define ‘winner’ then ‘contest’ remains undefined and so does ‘game’. So perhaps we should not waste too much time worrying about the exact meanings of words!

However, if we can maintain a sense of clarity (easier said than done), it doesn’t have to be a problem. As long as we recognise that there is not necessarily a direct relationship between language and the real world we can avoid at least some of the difficulties. Here are two quotes which clearly demonstrate that language can set up a system which is completely in accordance with the way the world is, or completely at odds with it.

*If we do not succeed, then we run the risk of failure.*

Dan Quayle

*I believe we are on an irreversible trend toward more freedom and democracy, but that could change.*

Dan Quayle

Suppose we were thinking about this second quote seriously, trying to see how something could be moving irreversibly, but with the possibility of change. We would be puzzled. We know that the statement is nonsense, so we don’t bother with it. Wittgenstein would have said that this is indicative of most philosophical thinking. We think we have a problem, but really there is no problem at all – language has posed a situation which seems puzzling, but only because we have described it poorly.

We might leave the final word to another American politician. When Abraham Lincoln was asked, ‘If the tail of a dog was called a leg then how many legs would a dog have?’ he said, ‘Four; calling a tail a leg doesn’t mean that it is one.’ Is he correct?

- A** Explain how to resolve the examples on page 275.
- B** Find some other examples where language sets up a system which does not apply to the material world.
- C** Chomsky’s and Wittgenstein’s views seem to have converged. Explain the similarities in your own words.
- D** Find an everyday concept, and see if Wittgenstein’s analysis of ‘game’ can be applied more generally.
- E** In light of all this, to what extent is language a representation of the world?
- F** What is the meaning of ‘meaning’?

## Language and human experience

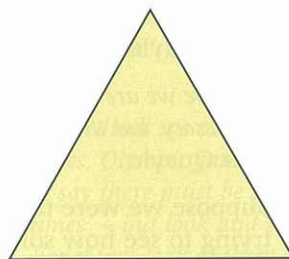
In considering issues related to the nature of meaning, we have seen that language is closely tied to ideas about human cognition and interaction with the world. Some thinkers go further and suggest that language is not an optional part of this interaction; that for humans, language shapes and moulds it. In *Men of Ideas*, Bryan Magee interviews John Searle, who is one such thinker.

**Magee:** *Philosophers like yourself regard language as absolutely fundamental to human life ... it would be interesting to hear your reasons.*

**Searle:** *We tend to have the idea that words are ... transparent, and that we can just apply them to reality – we just name our experiences, our social relations and the objects we encounter. But in fact ... what we find is that those forms of experience and those forms of social relations that we regard as characteristically human would be impossible without language; and that language is what distinguishes us more than anything else from other forms of animal life.*

*It might seem to us that our experiences come to us independently of any language, but Wittgenstein gives the following very simple example to illustrate the dependence of experience on language.*





He draws a triangle and says, 'See this [left-most] point as apex and the [right-hand] side as base.' Then he says, 'Now see [the top] point as apex and [the bottom] side as base.' You find that you have a different experience. One is immediately aware of two different experiences even though the optical conditions are identical ... These are not experiences my dog can have – not because he has not got the optical apparatus, but because he has not got the conceptual apparatus. The words ... are part of the experience. One can give a lot of more grand examples. La Rochefoucauld says somewhere that very few people would fall in love if they had never heard about it. I think that there is a profound truth underlying that remark, and it is that the possession of verbal categories like 'love' and 'hate' themselves help to shape the experiences they name; the concepts are part of the experience; and indeed in many cases it would be impossible to have the experience at all without a mastery of the appropriate vocabulary.

**Magee:** What you are saying really is that the world does not consist of a lot of entities to which we, as human beings, then attach the labels and names but rather that the objects of experience do not exist independently from the concepts we have. In this way the words enter into the very structure of our experience ...

**Searle:** Yes that's the point I am making but it is essential to understand it precisely. I am not saying that language creates reality. Far from it. Rather I am saying that what counts as reality is a matter of the categories that we impose on the world, and those categories are for the most part linguistic. And furthermore, when we experience the world we experience it through linguistic categories that help to shape the experiences themselves. The world does not come to us sliced up into objects and experiences. What counts as an object is already a function of our system of representation. The mistake is to suppose that the application of language to the world consists of attaching labels that are, so to speak, self-identifying. In my view, the world divides the way we divide it, and our main way of dividing things up is in language. Our concept of reality is a matter of our linguistic categories.

- A** Make sure that you have seen what is meant by the triangle example. Can you think of any other such examples?
- B** In a modern art gallery, visitors were walking past a pile of bricks, thinking it was work in progress. When the pile was labelled, and the visitors realised that it was a piece of art, they stopped and looked at it. Were they experiencing it in a different way because of the label? Is this an example of what Searle is getting at?
- C** We tend to value clothes from a famous designer more than those which are not, even if the cost is the same. Is this another case of labelling or is this all about social recognition and status?

- D** Searle's last statement has echoes of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in it. Is Searle making a case for linguistic determinism? How does he suggest that language and thought are related?
- E** Do you think fewer people would fall in love or hate each other if they didn't have words for it? Would they perhaps experience love and hatred in a different way? Or is this simply taking the whole notion too far?

This is not the end of the story – language seems to be linked to experience in still more profound ways than this. We are all aware of the feeling that we are not understood; that nobody sees the world quite like us, and that we are, in some abstract sense, alone. We have seen in this and earlier chapters that there may be good reasons for this. Despite what seems to be a very uniform world, we have no way of being certain if, for example, our perception of colour indicates anything meaningful about the world outside our minds. When we extend this argument to other sensations, it gets progressively more worrying. Modern science tells a similar story – our minds have contact with the world only through very specific and narrow channels of information – our senses. Our individual human awarenesses are located in worlds of experience that are completely isolated from one another. It's a scary thought.

It has been suggested that we can build bridges between the individual islands of our own experience through language. To some small extent, this must be true – using agreed symbols we stimulate the senses of another person, and we hope that they perceive our symbols. But we are not really interested in the transfer of symbols – what we want to do is transfer something of our world of *experience* to other people, and to receive some *experience* back. It is only because of our profound limitations that we have to do it via limited symbols. We long for a way to escape our isolation, a way to transfer content, directly and without distorting intermediaries, which we would soon do away with if we could.

As far as we know, all living creatures share our predicament. Like us, animals resort to symbols – they use coloured feathers, complex dances, mating songs, chemical markers and so on. We are fortunate in that our system of abstract symbols is highly evolved and able to represent far more complex experiences. With literature, and particularly with poetry, we can do remarkable things. But as far as we know, we are the only species which is miserable enough to recognise that, for all its sophistication, we can never transfer experience.

- A** Explain what is meant by 'experience' in the context of this passage.
- B** Why should we want to transfer experience?
- C** Why might we never be able to transfer experience?
- D** Do you think we can, in fact, ever transmit experience, despite the pessimism above?



## Where do we go from here?

Our quest for certainty has already been a long one, and the further we go the more problems we seem to raise. Certainly this chapter has brought to light another raft of philosophical and scientific issues of enormous complexity. What to do? We can't keep going like this! Perhaps we should take a different approach and, instead of getting more and more theoretical, look to a practical area which impacts enormously on our everyday lives – politics.

## Further reading

A most profound and wide-ranging introduction to a wide range of language issues is Stephen Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (William Morrow and Co., 1994) – it's probably one of single best TOK books you will find. Narrower, but still excellent, are S. I. Hayakawa's *Language, Thought and Action* (Allen & Unwin, 1974). For an entertaining guide to deceptive language try William Lutz's *Doublespeak* (Harper and Row, 1989). The problem of meaning is well covered in many philosophy texts; I can recommend as a very brief introduction Thomas Nagel's *What Does It All Mean?* (Oxford University Press, 1987) Chapter 5. Two more general overviews are provided in Reuben Abel's *Man is the Measure* (The Free Press, 1976) Chapter 7 and John Hopper's *Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (Prentice Hall, 1953). A fascinating, less philosophical and more comprehensive guide is found in David Crystal's *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), and Geoffrey Pullman's *The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax and other Irreverent Essays on the Study of Language* (University of Chicago Press, 1991) remains an entertaining and informative peek at some areas and characters in linguistics. Umberto Eco's *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003) is a marvellous account of the problems of interpretation/translation (and it is one of Eco's more accessible books). Howard Rheingold's *They have a Word for It* (Sarabande Books, 2000) is a lighthearted look at words that exist in one language but not another – very funny! As an introduction to the subtle and controversial aspects of language it is hard to beat Noam Chomsky's *Language and Thought* (Moyer Bell, 1993) or the early chapters in *Powers and Prospects* (Pluto Press, 1996). These are difficult but very rewarding.

## Resource file

### More about meaning

We can look into the way that meaning is constructed not only from individual words, but also from whole sentences. The problem is that we seem to get a lot more 'meaning' out of a sentence than appears to be in it, at least on a simple reading. That is, we always seem to go far beyond the available evidence to infer many things about the meaning of a sentence.

An extract from *Powers and Prospects* by Noam Chomsky.

...the gap between what the speaker/hearer knows and the evidence available becomes a chasm ... Take simple sentences, say, the following:

- 1 John is eating an apple.
- 2 John is eating.

In 2, the grammatical object of 'eat' is missing, and we understand the sentence on the analogy of 1, to mean (more or less) that John is eating something-or-other. The mind fills the gap, postulating an unspecified object of the verb.

Actually that is not quite true. Consider the following:

- 3 John is eating his shoe. He must have lost his mind.

But the sentence 2 does not include the case of eating one's shoe. If I say that John is eating, I mean that he is eating in a normal way; having dinner perhaps, but not eating his shoe. What the mind fills in is not an unspecified grammatical object, but something normal; that's part of the meaning of the construction (though what counts as normal is not).

Let's suppose that this is roughly correct, and turn to a slightly more complex case. Consider:

- 4 John is too stubborn to talk to Bill.

What this means is that John is too stubborn for him (John) to talk to Bill – he is so stubborn he refuses to talk to Bill. Suppose we drop 'Bill' from 4 to yield 5:

- 5 John is too stubborn to talk to.

Following the principle illustrated by 1 and 2, we expect 5 to be understood on the analogy of 5, with the mind filling the gap with some (normal) object of 'talk to'. The sentence 5, then, should mean that John is too stubborn for him (John) to talk to someone or other. But it doesn't mean that at all. Rather it means that John is too stubborn for anyone (maybe us) to talk to him (John).

For some reason, the semantic relations invert when the object of 'talk to' in 4 is deleted, unlike 1, where they remain unchanged. The same holds for more complex cases, as in 6:

- 6 John is too stubborn to expect the teacher to talk to.

The meaning is that John is too stubborn for anyone (maybe us) to expect the teacher to talk to him (John). In this case, parsing difficulties may make the facts harder to detect, though the sentence is still a very simple one, well below average sentence length in normal discourse.

We know all of these things, though without awareness. The reasons lie beyond possible consciousness. None of this could have been learned. The facts are known to people who have had no relevant experience with such [grammatical] constructions. Parents and peers who impart knowledge of language (to the limited extent that they do) have no awareness of such facts ... Just as dictionaries do not begin to provide the meanings of words, so the most elaborate multi-volume traditional grammars do not recognise, let alone begin to explain, even elementary phenomena of the kind just illustrated. It is only in very recent years ... that such properties have come to light. Correspondingly, it has become clear how little is known of the elementary phenomena of language. That's not a surprising discovery. As long as people were satisfied that an apple falls to the ground because that is its natural place, even the basic properties of motion remained hidden. A willingness to be puzzled by the simplest phenomena is the very beginning of science. The attempt to formulate questions about simple phenomena has led to remarkable discoveries about elementary aspects of nature, previously unsuspected.



# Parlez-vous my language?

Advances in dentistry may brighten our smiles, computer technology may lighten our load and engineering may help get us around, but it is through language and literature that we come alive  
writes Robert Dessaix in *The Age* (16 October 1999).

In the 1830s in England many factory owners argued against the building of railways on the grounds that making travel available to the masses would do nothing for increasing production, at least in their factories. Reform-minded industrialists thought travel might be of some practical benefit, making their workers healthier, happier and more productive. The high-minded spoke vaguely of train travel broadening the understanding of others, promoting tolerance and peace. They all had a point – they just had different notions of what sort of society was worth living in.

Debate about the teaching of foreign languages and literatures at our universities today follows much the same lines: the factory-owning class can't see much profit in it; the liberals hope it might provide a multicultural experience and open up trade opportunities at the same time; the high-minded say little and ponder retirement. Since the factory owners and their purse-proud surrogates in government and the universities rule the roost, the few lines allowed to

operate have to justify their existence nowadays by catering to hordes of Sunday excursionists, and making their stations double as shopping arcades.

To what extent is learning a foreign language or literature the key? In today's Australia this basic question is left without a cogent, socially acceptable answer. In a society that has become a cross between a giant business conglomerate and a feudal principality (I speak as a Victorian, of course), those of us who would argue for a place in the sun for language teaching need, I think, to bite the bullet and assert other values entirely.

To argue for the value of learning Spanish, say, in terms of social or commercial usefulness is a lost cause. What does reading Lorca or writing an essay on Buñuel do for the corporate balance sheets? Why should taxpayers pay for this sort of refinement of the sensibilities? Even to argue in these profit-and-loss terms is to be complicit with the philistines now running the academic show, not to mention the country. Besides, they are

right – learning a foreign language in Australia in 1999 is a useless exercise. It's all loss and no profit.

Many students and some staff won't be aware of how different things looked a few decades ago. At my state school, for instance, in the 1950s, when those who were not alive at the time keep insisting Australia was a 'monoculture' (and indeed cappuccinos and tom yum soup were hard to come by), we all studied Latin and French, some of us took German and Ancient Greek, and I was allowed to study Russian. At the Australian National University (ANU) in the years that followed, the range of languages on offer at different times was staggering: from regional Indonesian languages to Dutch and Polish, from Italian to Hindi. As Australia has become wealthier and more multicultural, the range has shrunk dramatically and in the next few months will shrink even further.

In those days of fuller employment, motivation was different, too. When I first took up Russian as a boy, walking into a newsagency in

suburban Sydney buying myself a dictionary, I was not seeking knowledge to increase my career opportunities – there were none. When I enrolled in Russian at ANU, I was not seeking knowledge in order to serve some powerful institution in later life or to get in on the technological revolution (although in those post-Sputnik days Russia's scientific prospects were looking bright). I did it – although I wouldn't have used these words then and to use them in these anti-humanist times is almost embarrassing – to magnify my experience of being human. And, at a more mundane level, to decipher the script on the Russian stamps in my collection.

What has changed? In economic terms the employment situation has changed for the worse, of course, making my kind of motivation seem a self-indulgent luxury. In the cultural sphere, however, the changes have been even more profound. Where once 'education' had several meanings, it increasingly now means just 'pedagogy', the inculcation of knowledge to economic ends. Disagreement about the meaning of 'education' is hardly new – the Greeks were at each others' throats about precisely these questions two-and-a-half millennia ago: one school argued for the legitimacy of learning for learning's sake, for education


as the disinterested search for truths (not just facts), for what made the world work and humans human; the other school (the pedagogical) favoured learning for material achievement and advancement, for self-enrichment and power.

Both schools had a point.

The problem for language and literature teachers in our universities today is that they are expected to straddle both concepts of education at a time when the pedagogical arguments for language learning carry little weight. No one is arguing against the need to inculcate knowledge at the tertiary level: we want it drilled into our dentists, pilots and bridge-builders until they drop. The humanities, however, are there for a different purpose and there is a sort of barbarism – or perhaps it's philistinism, which is barbarism gone middle-class – about the notion that their value is of the same nature as that of dentistry or molecular biology. The life of the mind the humanities nourish may be impossible without engineers and good dentists, but the life that engineers and dentists make possible is scarcely worth living without a richly informed mental dimension to it.

Not only the culture of education has changed. Two other developments have worked against language and literature departments in our universities. First, Australians now live in a distant khanate

of the great American English-speaking empire. In the Roman empire you would have had to be highly eccentric to bother learning anything except Latin and Greek. Why learn Pictish or Aramaic when you could travel from the Scottish border to the Euphrates with perfect ease speaking just the two imperial languages? The odd spy or civil servant may have felt pressed to acquire a local dialect or two, but quite frankly, as a Roman vice-chancellor would no doubt have pointed out, there was no great call for Lydian from the Roman business community. And in the early 14th century, an Arabic-speaking scholar or trader could move with similar ease within the Dar al-Islam, the House of Islam, speaking Arabic with anyone he needed to make contact with from Spain to Southern China, from the Volga River to Zanzibar. A spot of Turkish or Persian might have helped here and there, but was hardly a requirement.

Today as Australians we live firmly within the Dar al-English, and any vice-chancellor or dean worth his or her salt should point this out. But when I first started travelling in the 1960s, it wasn't quite like that. I carefully learnt a bit of Finnish, quite a lot of Polish, and even a spot of Bahasa Indonesian to get around. I learnt some Spanish to go to Spain and Italian to go to Italy. I wouldn't bother now. 



The language of globalisation is English. Every day a billion people use it in one form or another. It's the world's lingua franca. To argue that you need Italian or French to conduct business in Italy or France is wishful thinking – hundreds of thousands of foreigners have lived there for decades without speaking a syllable.

Multiculturalism of the official Australian variety hasn't helped the language teachers' cause, either. Our brand of multiculturalism is not, after all, about individual Australians ceasing to be monocultural or bicultural – indeed, some of Australia's immigrant communities fervently wish to remain monocultural – but about immigration policy, about making migrants feel their heritage counts for something, about making them feel more at home.

But multiculturalism of the kind we all piously doff our caps to has made language learning even less necessary than it was just after the war. In the first place, who needs a cadre of Italian-speaking non-Italians when hundreds of thousands of Australians of Italian background already do it so well? With our kind of immigration policy, an educated bilingual speaker of any of 150 languages can be found almost instantly to perform any task. And in the second place, given our patterns of immigration, in Australia you are obliged to speak English in a way in

which you simply aren't in parts of Los Angeles, New York or even Canada. Even SBS [an Australian channel providing foreign-language programmes for Australia's ethnic communities] is basically an English-speaking television station – it has to be. If Turks want to watch a Greek movie – as I hope many do – then they will have to be able to read English subtitles.

I am not arguing here that 'things have got worse'. I am not evoking any Golden Age of Education or Britishness. There was no Golden Age, not even in Athens. My point is simply that things have changed, certain ideas about education are in eclipse, and under these conditions those of us who believe that universities should offer more foreign languages and literatures, not fewer, need to rethink our tactics. Defending ourselves in terms of social or economic usefulness will get us nowhere, unless perhaps we are in the field of two or three Asian languages.

If we do capitulate to the pressure to justify our existence in utilitarian terms, in no time at all we will find ourselves setting up stalls selling *Italian for Tourists*, *Italian for Businessmen* and quickie survey courses in Italian literature (in English, naturally). The microbiologists don't put up with this sort of huckstering, so why should we? To argue the case for foreign languages

from a different set of values we are going to have to use terminology some of us have been trained to think of as humanist, universalist and outdated. (It's not outdated, of course, it just isn't fashionable in certain circles, including the very circles that are currently being decimated.)

We're going to have to talk in terms of multiplying perceptions of the world, of refining our awareness of being alive, of seeing in colour instead of black and white, of opening doors to other selves we never knew existed – of multiculturalism, if you like, of a much richer, more real kind than the present model. Each new language learnt opens up a parallel universe. It's embarrassing, but these things have to be said.

It was Wittgenstein who proposed that 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world'. You don't have to be Wittgenstein to grasp that if you only have one word (let's say *depressed*) to describe your mental state, and can't wonder whether you are actually more dejected or suffering from ennui rather than depressed, or melancholy, triste, despondent, disconsolate or just plain glum, then your experience is drained of colour and possibilities. You're blocked from reinventing yourself. Does this kind of nuanced linguistic awareness have a cash value? None, I would suggest, that can be calculated by Treasury

or Accounts. But it makes being here an adventure.

In our particular culture, too, a facility with language is still widely seen as a feminine skill. Whether it's the Bush Tucker man painstakingly dropping his 'g's – he occasionally slips up, but not too often – or politicians resorting to stunted English for a working-class audience, or our sportsmen carefully speaking like half-wits in television interviews, the message is clear: a real man doesn't speak too well. Speaking well is an embroidering activity, supplementary to the real business of life, and is therefore women's business. (Showbiz personalities – jester figures in general – have a special dispensation, of course. They can even be black or homosexual and get away with it.)

One of the things learning foreign languages can do, as can serious literary studies, is to expand the sense of what it means to be masculine, something women have been waiting for since Adam. In a recent report there was an inspiring item about an experiment at James Cook Boys Technology High School in Sydney. The boys are discovering that they can dance, sing, and play musical instruments and enjoy it – and still be boys. They are less inclined to truancy and aggression in the playground, and, judging by the interviews, don't feel so limited to stereotypical behaviour.

If we feel cudgelled into arguing for some kind of social usefulness for language learning, getting rid of the barbed wire around dominant ideas of masculinity could be one area to explore. There must surely be more to being a man in Australia than is currently being publicly touted.

To what is studying a foreign literature the key? Barry Jones famously suggested to John Howard that, in his case, reading *War and Peace* could open the door to being a better Prime Minister, but we don't know the reasons he gave. In my case, reading Russian and French literature was the key to multiple ways of understanding the world. It's obvious: once you've read Tolstoy and Turgenev, for example, you will simply love differently. And talk differently, reason differently, tell different kinds of jokes, travel through life differently. You'll become hungry for things you never knew existed. How many dollars is that worth?

More importantly, perhaps, you'll find spaces opening up inside you in which to become serious about the things you love. And those spaces will be gradually furnished by what you read in utterly unexpected, vivifying ways.

Without these furnished spaces it's hard to see how imagination can take root. And without imagination all the cleverness in the world

will leave our lives empty. To study a foreign literature, or cinematic or artistic tradition, is to take part in a vast conversation across generations and borders. And conversing is what the humanities are all about, surely. Not conversing in order to arrive at a set of facts, or to install a fashionable ideology in the minds of the young, but conversing for its own sake, about the most important things in the world – as we understand it, of course. That – not technological sophistication – is civilisation. To do it with a healthy set of teeth in our mouths, or using computer technology is a very fine thing, but our professional business is the conversation. It's a brilliant way of being alive.

High-minded arguments such as these will be sneered at by the book-keepers – by all those who think the life of the mind is a kind of effete luxury, or an entertaining adjunct to the real business of life. Those of us who think it is as much the real business of life as building casinos, maintaining an army, growing wheat and repairing the roads must start saying so – loudly. In these times old-fashioned values are suddenly radical again.

*This is an edited version of an address given at a School of Languages Postgraduate Conference at Melbourne University.*